

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
U.S. FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE

Environmental Assessment
For
Proposed Ring-necked Pheasant and Wild Turkey Hunting
On DeSoto National Wildlife Refuge
Washington County, Nebraska
Harrison County, Iowa
Pottawattamie, Iowa

Regional Director
Region 3, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
Bishop Henry Whipple Federal Building
Fort Snelling, Minnesota 55111

Project: DeSoto Refuge proposes to conduct ring-necked pheasant and wild turkey hunts on DeSoto National Wildlife Refuge.

For additional information about this project and this environmental assessment contact Larry Klimek at DeSoto National Wildlife Refuge, 1434 316th Lane, Missouri Valley, Iowa 51555, telephone (712)642-4121.

1. PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

1.1 Purpose

DeSoto National Wildlife Refuge currently offers white-tailed deer and snow goose hunting. The Refuge would like to open to upland game hunting. The ring-necked pheasant and wild turkey populations at the Refuge are at huntable levels. The pheasant population continues to expand with the combination of grasslands and crop ground. These birds are so numerous that counts of over 200 birds in one crop field are common. Wild turkey were nonexistent when the Refuge was established. Today the population is estimated between 500 and 1,000 birds.

1.2 Needs

The local landowners around DeSoto Refuge are overrun with requests from hunters to use their land. The need for public hunting far outweighs the amount of land available. Trespassing issues run high and this of course is a result of poor hunter ethics. Hunters become frustrated when they are faced with the lack of public land. DeSoto has huntable populations of upland game. The Refuge has the responsibility to ensure that hunting does not unduly disturb other species and other public use activities taking place on the Refuge.

The Fish and Wildlife Service supports hunting as one of the "Big 6" uses of National Wildlife Refuges across the country. The Refuge has huntable levels of pheasant and turkey. In managing the hunts in a limited, controlled manner, other species and public use activities would not be unduly disturbed. By offering a limited hunt for ring-necked pheasants and wild turkey the Refuge would also promote hunter education, hunter ethics and the value of hunting as a wildlife management tool.

2. ALTERNATIVES

2.1 Formulation of Alternatives

The alternatives were developed by DeSoto's refuge managers, incorporating the input from a wide range of people. A public meeting was held at DeSoto Refuge to discuss the issue and the draft environmental assessment. No one attended the meeting or submitted any public comments.

2.2 Alternatives

2.2.1 Open Upland Game Hunting on DeSoto NWR

Open the Refuge to upland game hunting to all legal hunters.

The number of hunters would not be limited or controlled by the Refuge. Hunters would have to meet state requirements, no Refuge specific regulations.

2.2.2 No Action

Continue with no upland game hunting on DeSoto Refuge.

2.2.3 Conduct a Limited Controlled Upland Game Hunt

Conduct an upland game hunting program on the Refuge. The number of hunters would be limited by the Refuge based upon the populations of pheasants and turkeys. Hunts would take place on specific dates, only. Hunters would be allowed to hunt only from specified field(s)/blinds/sites.

2.3 Comparison of Alternatives

If the Refuge opened to all upland game hunters the response would be overwhelming. A population of up to 600,000 people lie within the area surrounding DeSoto. With the large cities of Council Bluffs and Omaha within 30 miles and the numerous local hunters near the Refuge the crowds would be unsafe. This type of hunting would not provide a quality wildlife oriented recreational experience. The Refuge would not have the opportunity to promote hunter education, hunter ethics, and the value of hunting as a wildlife management tool.

The no action alternative leaves things as they are. However, DeSoto is undergoing some land use changes. The Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan calls for the reduction of cropland. This reversion, to mainly grassland, has already begun from over 2,000 acres down to an eventual 500 acres over the next 15 years. Although the reversion will be beneficial to wildlife in general the high pheasant and expanding turkey populations may suffer some declines. Also, the high population of pheasant, which are an exotic species, may be having a detrimental effect on the native northern bobwhite quail also found on the Refuge.

2.4 Identification of the Preferred Alternative

Conducting a limited controlled upland game hunt is the preferred alternative. Ring-necked pheasants and wild turkeys are at huntable population levels on the Refuge.

3. Affected Environment

3.1 Threatened and Endangered Species

An average of 50 bald eagles utilize the refuge during the fall migration, with highs of 120. In the fall, the eagles prey heavily upon the migrating waterfowl, mainly snow geese.

The eagles concentrate wherever the snow geese are roosting on the lake. The eagles also have a night roost in a large stand of cottonwoods on the Refuge.

Peregrine falcons have been seen on rare occasions.

3.2 Wildlife

Common resident species of wildlife occurring on DeSoto Refuge include white-tailed deer, coyote, raccoon, skunk, cottontail rabbit, squirrel, opossum, beaver, muskrat, and quail. Migratory species include numerous species of ducks and geese, marsh and wading birds, several species of owls and raptors, gulls, terns numerous grassland species and neotropical migrants.

3.3 Cultural Resources

The historic wreck of the steamboat Bertrand lies on DeSoto Refuge ground. The site is well known and protected.

No other known cultural resources occur on the refuge.

3.4 Public Use

DeSoto Refuge averages over 250,000 visitors per year. Activities include hunting, fishing, picnicking, wildlife viewing, and environmental education.

4. ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

4.1 Open The Refuge To Upland Game Hunting

Threatened and Endangered Species

Anticipated hunter response to open hunting would be immense. Control of large numbers of hunters would be very difficult. It would be nearly impossible to ensure that all hunters were aware of the presence of bald eagles. The disturbance factor to the bald eagles by large concentrations of hunters would be great.

Wildlife

Again, the Refuge would be inundated by hunters. The large

numbers of vehicles, hunting dogs, and hunters would be disruptive to resident wildlife.

Cultural Resources

Hunters would not have access to the cultural resource site on the Refuge.

Public Use

The visitors to the Refuge during the fall migration would be greatly affected by opening the Refuge to all upland game hunters. The fall migration attracts over 80,000 visitors. Refuge staff is stretched very thin to provide needed visitor services during this month of November. Opening during this same time period to upland game hunters would be unsafe for all people trying to utilize the Refuge.

Environmental Justice

Executive Order 12898, *Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations*, 59 Federal Register 7629 (1994), directs federal agencies to incorporate environmental justice in their decision making process. Federal agencies are directed to identify and address as appropriate, any disproportionately high and adverse environmental effects of their programs, policies, and activities on minority or low-income populations.

This alternative would provide additional public hunting for low-income or minority populations.

Cumulative Impacts

The cumulative impacts of unrestricted hunting would be detrimental to many species on the Refuge. The disturbance factor from so many hunters on the Refuge would be great to resident and migratory wildlife using DeSoto.

4.2 No Action

Threatened and Endangered Species

No affect to threatened or endangered species occurs with this action.

Wildlife

The Refuge pheasant population is very high. Northern

bobwhite quail are observed regularly but in very low numbers. Gray partridge and sharp-tailed grouse have been observed in isolated incidents. These three native species are potentially being hindered by the exotic pheasants.

The pheasant and turkey populations would continue as they are or steadily increase in numbers.

Cultural Resources

No affect to cultural resources.

Public Use

The hunting public would be denied an opportunity to have a quality hunt.

Environmental Justice

Low-income and minority populations would be denied an opportunity to have a quality hunt.

Cumulative Impacts

By not opening to upland hunting, there would be continued diminished opportunities for public hunting. As more and more land is developed, less and less area will be available for hunting.

4.3 Conduct a Limited Controlled Upland Game Hunt

Threatened and Endangered Species

With a limited controlled hunt, hunters would be hunting in grasslands and cropfields or in the timber (See attached map). Bald eagles, as outlined in Section 3.1, are found preying on the snow geese mainly on the lake and on a few crop fields, although in very small numbers. Hunting in the traditional eagle roost would be prohibited. The hunters would be alerted to the presence of eagles.

Wildlife

Resident wildlife in the area of a site being hunted, would be disturbed while the hunt was taking place. By limiting the number of hunters the disturbance would be minimal.

Cultural Resources

Hunters would not have access to the cultural resource site on the Refuge.

Public Use

It is anticipated that the pheasant hunts would take place on one or two weekends in October. The large numbers of visitors that come to see the fall migration occurs in November. The turkey hunts will take place in the spring. Public use at this time of year is not heavy. By planning the hunts during low visitation times, minimal or no disturbance to the visiting public will take place.

Environmental Justice

Low-income and minority populations would have the opportunity for a quality hunt on the Refuge.

Cumulative Impacts

By having the controlled hunt, the Refuge is providing some land for the public. As more and more land is developed around the Refuge less and less public hunting will be available. The Refuge, although small, will at least be open to the public to continue the hunting tradition. Because the additional hunting is on a controlled basis there should not be any negative cumulative impact to the biological resources of the Refuge.

5. LIST OF PREPARERS

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service - DeSoto National Wildlife Refuge

Melinda Sheets, Supervisory Refuge Operations Specialist

Reviewed by: Larry Klimek, Refuge Manager

6. Consultation and Coordination With the Public and Others

The Refuge held an open house on November 25, 2002, which was announced to the public through a news release, to discuss opening the Refuge to ring-necked pheasant and wild turkey hunting. The Environmental Assessment was also available for public review and comment at the Refuge Visitor Center and on the Region 3 NEPA web site from December 6th, 2002 through January 6th, 2003.

The Refuge managers also met with representatives from the Iowa Department of Natural Resources and Nebraska Game and Parks Commission concerning this matter. Both States were in favor of the new hunting and signed letters of concurrence.

7. Public Comments on Draft Environmental Assessment and Responses

No public comments, written or verbal, were received concerning the draft environmental assessment.